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SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH NEO-TRIBALIST WOMEN'S ACTIVIST

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Recent media reporting about the rise in the number of official and unofficial female proselytizers in the Kingdom has generated much debate. The number of "unsanctioned" female preachers is increasing, and their lack of supervision by authorities breeds uncertainty about the messages that they are sending. PolOff met with a self-proclaimed, unsanctioned female preacher who uses a magazine targeting Saudi girls, as well as lectures in universities, to help spread her message. She expressed her conservative, tribally-based views on the roles and challenges facing young women in Saudi society and shared her work experiences in influencing these young women in their development. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) PolOff met with Saudi businesswoman Eman Abdullah Al-Akeel (strictly protect) on August 27 at a "ladies only" coffeeshop. Al-Akeel owns a widely-distributed magazine called Hayat that is published in Riyadh by and for young women throughout the Gulf. The magazine focuses on Islamic issues concerning young women and their social development. Al-Akeel is also a self-proclaimed female "proselytizer," who lectures voluntarily in her free time at prominent women's colleges and universities in the Kingdom on the rights and roles of Saudi women. Al-Akeel candidly shared her remarkably regressive views on Saudi society as they pertain to girls and women, specifically regarding career opportunities, domestic violence, and marriage. According to Al-Akeel, Islam affords girls many "rights and protections," but the Saudi girls' lack of knowledge of their rights allows for many abuses to occur.

¶3. (C) Al-Akeel said that, to date, her focus has been the promotion of career development. By inviting other businesswomen to share their experiences, Al-Akeel educates young women on the "plentiful" opportunities that they have. She said that in Saudi Arabia, girls are raised to go to school, attend university, get married, and have children. She said that they do not have the time to develop themselves properly and understand what they really want out of life. She also stated that many girls do not think that they have any choices, and so their fathers choose everything for them. Al-Akeel's goal is to bring as much information to the girls as possible, most importantly regarding their rights under Shari'a law.

¶4. (C) During her discussion on career development, Al-Akeel said that the West's perception of "limitations" on the job market for Saudi women is only an illusion. She said that women can do whatever they want so long as they act in accordance with the current law. She felt that if women knew their rights and the rules, such as how to properly apply for a business license, then there would be no problems. She said that women are not prohibited from working in general, so perceived "limitations" do not really

exist. In her view, Saudi women simply do not want to work in some professions.

15. (C) Al-Akeel continued that there are three types of women, implicitly stated in order of descending importance: Saudi women, Muslim women, and all other women. According to her, Saudi women will only perform very specific jobs, and they currently are allowed to hold these jobs. The many sectors in which Saudi women cannot be fully employed, such as retail, nursing, law, and government, are meant for "other" women. Al-Akeel said that since women are to be financially provided for by their fathers until they are married, after which their husbands provide for them in accordance with Islam, there is no real reason for women to work other than personal fulfillment. She added that poor Saudi women, including divorced women whose families turn them away in shame, are to be taken care of by the shelters and soup kitchens operated by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Remarkably, Al-Akeel did not feel that affording divorced Saudi woman a chance for independence and dignity through work was either a good or necessary option.

16. (C) On the issue of marriage, Al-Akeel stated that the Quran only honors marriages to which the woman has expressly agreed. Therefore, even if the father and brothers agree, but the woman says no, the marriage is void. She felt that if women knew this information, many abusive, incestuous, and cross-generational marriages would not take place. When questioned about family pressures and tribal concerns regarding marriage, she remarked that families are the most important element of Saudi society. When the father presses his daughter to marry a man she does not want, she needs to talk to her mother or siblings. If they cannot help her, then she needs to ask for assistance from her extended family. If they cannot help her, then despite the Quranic teachings, she said, the woman should marry the man chosen by her father in order to protect her family. When pushed about a woman's right to choose her own husband irrespective of economic or tribal factions, she reiterated that a woman can always say no, but since no right-thinking Saudi woman would even want to marry outside of her own class or tribe, this concern is not an issue.

17. (C) When questioned by PolOff, Al-Akeel at first tried to avoid the issue of domestic violence. She finally admitted that domestic violence is, unfortunately, endemic in Saudi society, even though she said that it is prohibited in the Quran. She said that the abusive behavior occurs because of tradition. Al-Akeel suggested that in severely abusive cases where the entire family is non-responsive to an abused woman's pleas for help, the victim retains the right to go to the police. However, due to family honor, if the abuse is not severe, then the police should not be involved, and the woman should "endure" the situation. She then recounted a story told to her during one of her lectures about a woman who was a victim of incest and rape by several male relatives, including her father. After failing to seek support from her family, and after listening to one of Al-Akeel's lectures on the rights of women under Islam, this woman went to the police. The police sent her to live in her uncle's home for protection until her father was declared "cured" from his "problem." Remarkably, Al-Akeel said that she felt the police "properly" handled the issue in accordance with Shari'a law, even though none of the victim's male relatives were ever arrested, tried, or punished for acts that are considered capital crimes under Islamic law and punishable by death (beheading).

18. (C) COMMENT: From her privileged vantage point, Al-Akeel's perspectives on women's issues demonstrate the very conservative nature of the average, educated Saudi woman. Her magazine Hayat's popularity has skyrocketed during its seven years in print, with its readership growing from 15,000 in its first year to 50,000 presently. The widespread acceptance and continued expansion of Hayat, even to other countries, indicates the support tens of thousands of young women have for Al-Akeel's extremely conservative ideology. Given that a majority of Saudi Arabia's population

is under the age of 30, the conservative beliefs of these young women are important indicators of how they perceive the Government's attempts at reform -- especially as they relate to women. If women themselves -- particularly those like Al-Akeel who understand their rights -- accept and support the "status quo," it should come as little surprise that Saudi men would do the same. These attitudes reflect the young generation of Saudis who have had no direct exposure to the West. They are therefore illustrative of the problem that the King is attempting to solve through the scholarship program that aims to send tens of thousands of Saudis to universities abroad. Even more compelling is that fact that educated, modern "women like Al-Akeel have such strong allegiance to traditional tribal law that, to their way of thinking, tribal custom can trump Islamic law itself, thereby condemning many Saudi women to suffer a degree of inequality that their religion expressly forbids. END COMMENT.

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